



## Hiding Behind the Church: Towards an Understanding of Sorcery in Christian Papua New Guinea

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# Hiding Behind the Church: Towards an Understanding of Sorcery in Christian Papua New Guinea

Deborah Van Heekeren

*This paper considers the assumption that the long-term success of the Christian Churches in some parts of Papua New Guinea (PNG) will eliminate or even regulate the magical practices that are nowadays commonly described as 'sorcery'. Among the Vula'a of PNG men seeking prestige and influence turn to the Church, and some of them are said to be sorcerers who 'hide behind it'. Most deaths continue to be attributed to sorcery, and fear of sorcery and the need to counter it with other sorcery eclipses Christian proscriptions. It is power – rather than the introduced concepts of 'good' and 'evil' brought by Christian colonizers that dominates current discourse – that contributes to the persistence of sorcery albeit in a variety of new and introduced forms. Sorcery is effective because it creates a culture of fear. I conclude, then, by applying Heidegger's analysis of fear to Vula'a sorcery to suggest that an anthropology of fear will contribute to a better understanding of sorcery in contemporary PNG.*

**Keywords:** Sorcery; Christianity; Fear; Power; Magic; Papua New Guinea

There is no religion without magic any more than there is magic without at least a trace of religion. (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 221)

The basis of a sorcerer's power, and the basis of all important forms of magical power, is a link with the realm of the spirits. (Lepowsky 1981, 444)

The connection Maria Lepowsky drew between magic, power and the spirit realm of Vanatinai in the Massim culture area of Papua New Guinea (PNG) echoed the

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Trobriand traditions described by Malinowski almost sixty years earlier. Lepowsky (1981, 371) also suggested that magic may be considered ‘a form of religious ritual not unlike the prayers directed to God, the Virgin Mary, or various saints by Christians in the Western World’. Her comments point to a long tradition of anthropological debate about the relationship between magic and religion that has waned as Melanesianists turn their attention to the study of Christianity. The recent emergence of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence as Melanesian phenomena to be addressed under the auspices of human rights agendas (see Jorgensen 2014) draws new attention to an old anthropological problem: the disagreement about whether ‘religion’ or ‘magic’ best describes the Melanesian lifeworld. The debate can be traced to the uncertainty with which Malinowski (1961, 73) approached the subject in his Trobriand ethnography, where he used the term ‘magico-religious’ to refer to a not-yet-developed form of religion which coexisted with pure magic: ‘In a number of magical formulae, there is an invocation of ancestral spirits, and they receive offerings in several rites.’

There is a long tradition of ethnographic studies of sorcery by Melanesianists. Similar to recent reports of escalation, a special issue of *Social Analysis* (1981) on sorcery and social change in Melanesia highlighted a dramatic increase in sorcery and witchcraft in PNG (Lindenbaum 1981, 119), and Michele Stephen’s (1987) edited volume *Sorcerer and Witch in Melanesia* stands as an exemplary comparative study of the region. Detailed discussion of the regional diversity of sorcery and witchcraft practices at the present time is beyond the scope of this paper, and a comparative study such as Stephen’s (1987) is perhaps overdue. For many decades it was widely assumed that the spread of Christianity would serve as a natural antidote to sorcery practices, but history has shown otherwise (Hermkens 2015; Jorgensen 2014; Van Heekeren 2007). In order to understand the persistence of sorcery in a region of PNG where conversion to Christianity is comparatively long term I reflect on my ethnography of the Vula’a people of the Hood Point area of the southeast coast with whom I have worked since 2001. I discuss the relationship between Vula’a Christianity and the practices that have—since colonial times—been described as ‘sorcery’, showing the continuities and transformations that have emerged over a period of more than a century. Reviewing some anthropological approaches to theorising ‘sorcery’, I argue that we need to re-think the ‘magico-religious’ in Melanesia. Broadly I contend that Vula’a sorcery is intimately connected to a religious or ‘magico-religious’ cosmo-ontology, by which I mean a specific way of being in and making sense of a lifeworld. Against a conventional identification of sorcery as a malign aspect of ‘custom’ in Melanesia that has been marginalised by the rise of Christianity, I argue that power, rather than the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ applied by Christian colonisers and some anthropologists (see Barker 1990, 146; Lawrence and Meggitt 1965, 9; Williams 1944, 133), remains fundamental to the persistence of sorcery and related practices. This power is effective because it fosters a culture of fear that works to perpetuate such practices, albeit in a variety of new and often introduced forms. Accordingly, I apply Heidegger’s concept of mood and his analysis of

fear to Vula'a sorcery to suggest that an anthropology of fear will contribute to a better understanding of sorcery in this area of PNG.

### **A Brief History of Vula'a Sorcery and Christianity**

The Vula'a speak an Austronesian language commonly called Hula, and occupy seven villages along the coastal region of PNG's Central Province. Most of my fieldwork has been carried out in Irupara village which has a population of around 500 and is approximately 100 km east of Port Moresby, the national capital. The Vula'a are mostly Christians. Their Christian experience is, though, rendered meaningful in a lifeworld inhabited by the ancestors and fashioned by magical practices that include sorcery. Most Vula'a are nowadays members of the United Church of Papua New Guinea (formerly the London Missionary Society (LMS) in this area), which has dominated the southeast coast since the end of the nineteenth century. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has also had a significant presence in one village, Irupara, since the 1940s and retains a minor presence in the largest village of the Vula'a, Hula.<sup>1</sup> An informal survey of Hula that I made in 2010 identified a florescence of new Christian Churches, including the Grace Baptists, the Living Light Foursquare Gospel Church, Assembly of God (AoG), as well as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, yet the United Church retains a stronghold in the region. Although it is not our main concern here, it must be said that the influx of new Churches has contributed to instances of social disharmony (see Van Heekeren 2014). It was also evident when I visited in 2010 that the style of the Charismatic Churches had influenced the once conservative United Church in Irupara village.

Vula'a conversion to Christianity was typical of LMS successes in the Pacific. As Chatterton (1974, 18–22) has suggested, the congregational form of church government accorded very closely with the socio-political structure of the Papuan coastal communities. Christian teaching was blended with local concepts and translated into local languages. In other LMS areas Christianity was also merged with the existing cosmo-ontology. For example, in an early report on 'native' Christianity in the Solomon Islands Ian Hogbin (1934, 262) wrote that Christians in Malu'u were unaware that their conception of Christianity had been 'fitted into' existing social patterns. Moreover sickness and death which, up until that time, were subject to 'the powers of the sorcerer' were now regarded as punishment from God; in this case for unconfessed sins (Hogbin 1934, 262). In the 1940s F. E. Williams (1944, 128–135) documented the 'extensive culture loss' of the Keveri people (north of Abau on the southeastern coast of Central District), who were evangelised by Charles Abel's Kwato Mission. Williams made a distinction between 'sorcery' (magic connected to homicide) and 'white magic' and while generally optimistic about a perceived reduction in sorcery as a result of the mission influence, he conceded that it would be hard to believe that there was no longer any 'making of magic' (133). And while it appeared that prayer had taken the place of magic in public undertakings, the sick remained willing to 'submit themselves to magical treatment' (133). Williams

found it interesting that illness, mainly understood as a punishment for reverting to customs forbidden by the mission, had become associated with sin (136). He attributed this to an association between the old customs and the newly threatened loss of an after-life, suggesting that the Keveri substituted physiological death for the death of the soul or spirit (136).

At the end of the nineteenth century, R. E. Guise (1899, 216–217) commented on the common belief in the general vicinity of the Vula'a that no one died a natural death: 'Some *palagu* [roughly 'powerful spirit'] or *wara* [roughly 'sorcerer'] has accomplished it.' *Palagu* in its capitalised form is now the Hula language term for the Christian God. In the past they were powerful spirits that acted as caretakers of 'dangerous' places, and were also said to 'own everything'. It was customary to perform a ritual to win the *palagu*'s favour when one first entered its domain. Similar rites may nowadays be enacted when entering one's garden—to honour the ancestor spirits—and when passing the cemetery at Hula. In contrast the *wara aura* is a man skilled in accessing the realm of the ancestral spirits and invoking their power in order to do harm.

In 1904 A. C. English, who had been the Government agent at Rigo, described a construction known as a '*kogi*' in Babaka village (the nearest inland neighbour of Irupara village) as '[t]he house where the sorcerer or head doctor of the village resides'. His ambivalence about whether to use the term 'sorcerer' or 'doctor' is telling. It is this same double-sidedness that has made magic problematic for anthropologists and the Christian Churches alike. One of my elderly Vula'a interlocutors told me that the LMS permitted forms of magic that were beneficial. Although it was forbidden to utter magical incantations, one could circumvent the prohibition by saying the words under one's breath. Some Vula'a women still sing magical songs to promote the yield of their gardens or when collecting shellfish. The United Church has adopted a position of tolerance, assuming that such practices will eventually die out. While they are correct in some respects, as many of the old women are not passing on their magical knowledge, there remain young Vula'a women who have inherited the traditions of their lineage.

The social structure of the Vula'a villages has not historically supported an ascribed sorcerer such as we see for the Austronesian-speaking Mekeo of southern PNG (see Hau'ofa 1981; Stephen 1995). There were, though, *vele para* (lineage heads nowadays called 'chiefs') and war leaders whose knowledge included what is commonly described as 'magic'. Traditionally—and it is still the case—knowledge of this type was a matter of inheritance. It was passed through the male line on the basis of primogeniture but there were exceptions to the rule. For instance, passing knowledge to a second or third son or a nephew who had proven himself worthy of it, or if there was no suitable male heir a daughter could inherit in order to preserve the knowledge, but she would not use the negative magic that is associated with sorcery (Stephen 1995, 296–297; Van Heekeren 2004). Women in this region use magic but it always has positive or productive ends; for example, gardening magic or for healing certain ailments.

Christian conversion in the Hood Point villages was so successful that an Indigenous pastorate emerged by the early 1960s (Oram 1971). Because the mission

suppressed much of the ritual and feasting through which men previously achieved status, new avenues of prestige were sought through positions as pastors and deacons in the Church. After the Second World War, Church activities became more important and pastors exercised a new authority (Oram 1971, 125). From the beginning they were in the best position to access the power of the Christian God which was merged with the power of the ancestors and of sorcery. These indigenous pastors were often from influential families with strong traditions of magical knowledge. In 2001 I learned that Irupara village was somewhat reluctant to receive their newly appointed pastor, who was from Hula village, in large part because his father had a reputation for sorcery. While evidence suggests that the magical practitioners of the past were powerful but generally benevolent and influential leaders, nowadays 'sorcerers' also embody the ideas of evil imported by Christianity and colonialism.

A letter to a daily newspaper in 2013 exemplifies the way the new Pentecostal Churches have contributed to the reshaping of local interpretations of sorcery. It offered a list of passages from the Holy Scriptures in support of an argument that 'Sorcery is real because Satan is also real' (Devis 2013). In a discussion of Pentecostalism in Telefolmin, PNG, Dan Jorgensen (2005, 446, emphasis added) explains that:

A key doctrine of Third Wave Theology [a collective term for a post-1980s family of neo-charismatic movements] is that Christians have a choice between passive and active responses to the challenge of Satan's power in the world, and that the most promising strategy is to engage the enemy by aggressive confrontation through prayer, known as *power* encounters.

Here the differences between those areas in PNG that have experienced the type of evangelism given attention in much recent ethnography (see Douglas 2001; Robbins 2007) and those such as the southeastern coast, where the mainline Churches continue to dominate, is noteworthy. As we saw in the case of the term '*palagu*', Vula'a Christianity was translated by the mission teachers according to local concepts. And *alama* (literally, 'fight'), to take another example, was appropriated to mean 'sin'. Where no Hula approximation existed, the English word was adapted to the local form, for instance *temoni* was used for the English 'demon'. Before Christianity the *palagu* were neither good nor evil. They were powerful and as such they were feared and respected. It is 'power'—locally called *iavu*—that is at the centre of Vula'a cosmo-ontology. The term is best translated as heat, and more specifically the heat of the ancestors. The Vula'a depend on the heat of ancestral spirits for success in certain undertakings, and there are techniques employed to establish and strengthen connections with them. In everyday life, one should show respect and make small offerings to ancestors to maintain productive relations. And when tasks of great importance are undertaken one must prepare by getting hot. Sorcery is such a task. I have described in detail the practices of Vula'a sorcerers and the connection between these and other cosmo-ontological aspects elsewhere (Van Heekeren 2007, 2012). Later I will elaborate this connection in terms of an anthropology of fear.

Nowadays in Irupara it is frequently remarked that sorcerers ‘hide behind the Church’ and it is widely believed that some sorcerers disguise themselves by living and acting like Christians. Deacons and pastors are often the most likely suspects. Magical practices are publicly condemned by the Church but pastors take a position of tolerance claiming that eventually these will die out. Some forms of magic are disappearing—dying with the old people—but many are not. In fact the variety of sorcery appears to be on the increase as people travel more widely and extend their repertoires. So, in the reality of village life, magical knowledge is seen as a necessary antidote to the effects of sorcery. That magic is not always conceived in negative terms is essential to understanding the force of sorcery and the fear that it fosters but also allays. As I have said sorcery knowledge is often inherited, but in other instances Vula’a sorcerers learn their craft from established practitioners, or purchase it from outside.

As with the language of Christianity, attending to the language of sorcery assists our understanding of the historical transformations in Vula’a magical practices. In his *History of the Balawaia* (western neighbours of the Vula’a) John Kolia (1977, 67) described the *wara* men, who prowl the bush at night committing crimes of violence. Based on earlier accounts of sorcery he saw the *wara* as a distinct category of what was to be feared by the Balawaia. In a 1939 Hula grammar *wara* was translated as both sorcerer and barracuda (Short 1963 [1939], 78). A recent Vula’a explanation for the naming of the barracuda is that ‘it comes like a “sorcerer”; quiet, unseen, then snatches its prey’ (Van Heekeren and Goddard n.d.). The description fits with what I have argued is the most distinctive feature of the Vula’a sorcerer: the ability to either transform himself into another creature or to become invisible (Van Heekeren 2007). Deception is important to the practice of sorcery, and the Church it would seem provides an opportunity to deceive. In a different vein, I have heard local sorcerers described as hired assassins and even ‘hit-men’. One senior sorcerer is known as ‘The Commander’ and is openly criticised for irresponsibly teaching his craft to ‘trigger happy’ young men. Technology as well as Western popular culture has expanded the sorcerer’s magical repertoire: in one case a battery-powered torch was used to sorcerise victims.

Young Vula’a people who spend time in the national capital, Port Moresby, have recalled for me episodes of spirit possession they have witnessed or in which they have been involved. Accounts of burning hair to chase away a spirit that has taken hold of someone re-situate a long-standing village practice in a new cosmopolitan context. Pungent odours such as burning hair or coconut oil have great efficacy. Strong odours are smelled by spirits. The smell of burnt hair releases a sorcerer or warrior from his state of *waka* (see below) when he is in close proximity to the spirits. Similarly, divination by a practitioner in Port Moresby known in Hula as a *vegia inaina aura* (literally, one who ‘sees the unseen and talks intimately with them’) nowadays transcends the 100 km distance between the city and the village. Moreover, practitioners now receive large sums of money for their work, whereas in the past they received food, traditional wealth or a pig. The basic elements of the *wara*’s power, whether hidden behind Christianity or publicly displayed, whether



inherited or procured from an unscrupulous 'commander', retain continuity with the past on the southeast coast. To understand this connection we need to see sorcery as part of an enduring and encompassing magico-religious lifeworld.

### Revisiting the Anthropology of Melanesian Religion, Magic and Sorcery

Fenella Cannell (2005, 342; 2006, 8) has highlighted the problem of defining Christianity primarily in terms of theories that prioritise modernity and individualism, and are linked causally to social change. Making sense of the relationship between sorcery and Christianity in PNG does, though, require that we take account of the dramatic changes that have occurred over a relatively short period; at the same time, we must not lose sight of the enduring cosmo-ontologies that shape the experience of change. The emergence of Christianity as a suitable subject for anthropology has filled a gap left by the magic/religion problem that fuelled debate prior to the 1980s. Faced with a history of inadequate attempts to define religion and many of the phenomena that constitute religious experience, ethnographers abandoned attempts to construct general definitions (Barth 1975, 12). Michele Stephen (1995, xiii) noted that the tendency in anthropology was towards the use of more neutral terms such as 'cosmology', 'ritual' and 'belief'. Fredrik Barth had also successfully used the idea of 'secrecy'. Generally the emphasis shifted to localised analyses, sometimes jettisoning the religion concept in favour of magic (for example, Stephen 1995; Young 1983).

Joel Robbins (2007, 14), who has done much to revitalise the anthropology of religion, has criticised approaches to Melanesian religion that emphasise its pragmatism, superficiality or lack of transcendent scope. For instance he cites and then dismisses Lawrence and Meggitt's (1965) book *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*, which was the first comparative study of Melanesian religion. Robbins (2007, 14) says that the claims the authors make are founded on inappropriate categories and no one takes much notice of them any more. It is worth noting, though, that Lawrence and Meggitt brought a religious perspective that had previously been lacking in Melanesian anthropology. Moreover the comparative goals of their project and the desire to formulate broad definitions of Melanesian religion are elided in recent analyses. In their study Lawrence and Meggitt (1965, 7–8) drew on the theories of Goode, Tylor, Frazer, Malinowski, Durkheim and Horton, suggesting the breadth and complexity of the phenomena they were trying to articulate. They came to see religion for Melanesians as a total world-view, a total cosmic order made up of an interrelated empirical and non-empirical realm. Their approach prioritised religion as an organising feature of Melanesian life, at the same time recognising its connection to the economic and socio-political dimensions.

Nevertheless, Lawrence and Meggitt (1965, 9) echoed Williams's earlier views on sorcery, defining it as 'any ritual designed to kill or harm human beings'. This negative essentialism was enough to exclude sorcery from the religious domain. A decade later Barth (1975, 131) proposed that sorcery was a particular category of magic: 'constructs which persons use to identify intentional social actors behind calamitous events'.



Prevailing anthropological interpretations of sorcery were challenged in 1987 when Michele Stephen (1987, 3) argued for ‘the importance of sorcery as a dimension of Melanesian religion’. It is noteworthy that by 1995 Stephen thought that ‘magic’ rather than ‘religion’ was the more appropriate term for understanding the Mekeo people with whom she worked, yet her arguments importantly directed Melanesianists to contextualise the practices associated with causing death and illness in the knowledge systems and cosmologies of those we study. Stephen’s position reflected a general shift from functional/structural and interpretive analysis in anthropology to practice-oriented approaches that saw all human activity as situational: ‘When abstracted from its immediate context, an activity is not quite the same activity’ (Bell 2009 [1992], 81–82). Bell’s succinct observation highlights the pitfalls of reifying sorcery as a singular cause for concern in contemporary Melanesia. Many anthropologists now acknowledge that the diversity of practices that have come to be known as ‘sorcery’ in Melanesia represent only a part of the corpus of people’s magical knowledge. And further, that they are intimately connected to a cosmo-ontology that nowadays often encompasses Christianity. I note, here, that what Stephen (1979, 159) consistently saw as being fairly typical of Melanesian religious systems was the existence of ‘a realm of non-human power that can be harnessed by men for their own ends’.

Non-human power and human knowledge form the nexus from which to understand Melanesian sorcery. Darrell Whiteman (1984, 87) has claimed that ‘Melanesians rely primarily on religious knowledge as their basis for knowing and understanding the world’. We may or may not agree with Whiteman that what he is referring to is ‘religion’. Yet importantly his identification of a particular basis for knowing and understanding the world as a totality—what I would prefer to call a cosmo-ontology—was largely missing from earlier analyses. Goody (1987) also points to the importance of the way knowledge works in oral cultures, where it is held by particular people and where the most knowledgeable are the most likely to die. Knowledge that has not been passed on goes to the world of the ancestors with the consequence that ‘[t]he dead must know more than the living’ (Goody 1987, xi). This phenomenon, often called the cult of the ancestors, is underpinned by the transmission of knowledge: ‘the forefathers are also the forbearers, the carriers of “tradition”. And it is in the cult of the ancestors that the dead reveal some of their superior, more comprehensive, knowledge’ (xi). Any discussion of Melanesian ‘religion’—and by extension ‘sorcery’—should take account of the importance of ancestors and ancestor spirits and the related fact that there is an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead. It is this connection that makes sorcery possible.

### Vula’a Cosmo-Ontology and Making Sense of Sorcery

In much of my writing on the Vula’a I have drawn attention to their concept of *awana*. The term expresses linguistically what I have described as the relational ethos of the Vula’a (see Van Heekeren 2012). It might also be seen as functioning in the same way that morality does for other societies. The Vula’a themselves often associate

*awana* with ideas about knowing and attitude; that is, knowing how to behave correctly in any situation. This encompasses a sociality that includes the ancestors. *Awana* is also an expression of the relationship between one's social self in the living world and one's *avuavu* (the spirit or, better, that part of the self that will join the ancestors approximately one year after death). *Awana* is important because it creates the conditions for abundance. For example, if a group of men go out fishing and nothing is caught they will return and perform rituals to repair the *awana*. It is essential for a successful catch. Those who remain at home must also work to maintain the correct relationships. They should show restraint in all their activities and, most importantly, quarrelling should be avoided. Traditionally, warfare, hunting, gardening and the production of sago and coconut oil also required ritual action to ensure *awana* and thus a plentiful return for one's labour. The rituals included abstinence from certain foods and occasionally sexual abstinences, both known as *waka*. When someone has successfully undertaken *waka* preparation the state of *iavu* (heat, power) that I described earlier is achieved.

In light of the argument that I want to make here *iavu* is central, but I emphasise that it is only one aspect of the complex very generally identified as *awana*, which is best understood as an ideal state of existence for the living community. *Awana* is ensured through moral vigilance that takes account of relationships with the non-living. *Waka* (ritual abstinence) is instrumental in the achievement of *awana*. It is a form of power insofar as the more intensely *waka* is performed the greater is the acquisition of *iavu* or proximity to the ancestors. Thus it is the very condition that engenders *awana* that makes the practices we call sorcery possible. Both *awana* and *waka* are achievable ontological states, but as the Vula'a themselves say, '*waka* requires more effort'. One undergoes *waka* in order to get hot. I have argued elsewhere (Van Heekeren 2012) that the fundamental impetus of *awana* is its relational imperative, while the aim of *waka* is that of individuation or separation from the living community. It is an ontological transformation achieved through a rigorous physical regimen that alters corporeality so as to resemble the ancestors.

In the past sorcery knowledge was always inherited. Nowadays men are invited to join bands of *wara* to learn their craft. They undergo an initiation of sorts that entails killing someone from their village. Recent local descriptions that emphasise the swollen stomachs of victims imply poisoning, and further research on the newer techniques employed by sorcerers in this area is required. However, an early account (Guisse 1899, 216–217) that describes a method whereby the victim is rendered susceptible to snakebite is consistent with contemporary accounts explaining sorcery deaths. More commonly, though, people are vigilant when it comes to their personal belongings and leavings. Clothing, cigarette butts and betelnut leavings are raw material for the sorcerer's 'work'. According to Vula'a belief, the sorcerer might steal an item of clothing, place it in a container and bury it. As the fabric starts to decompose the victim's affliction takes hold and they eventually die.

J. G. Frazer's (1951, 12) 'sympathetic magic', founded on the idea that things that have once been conjoined will remain so, and Lévy-Bruhl's principle of *appurtenances*

may seem outmoded in contemporary anthropology, but both are useful here. Lévy-Bruhl (cited in Cazeneuve 1973, 8) proposes that the self extends beyond the body to the appurtenances (hair, footprints, clothing and so forth). As Cazeneuve explains: 'The relationship of participation between the individual and his appurtenances is not the result of a transfer of ideas or feelings, like that which we make between a man and his photograph' (8). Rather it is experienced directly. If the sorcerer can procure an appurtenance, he is in a position to inflict harm. After the victim dies and is buried the apprentice sorcerer must go to the grave and remove the liver which he then consumes, further suggesting a magical appropriation of self-substance. Because the victims of sorcery are often perceived to be 'successful' we might also assume a physical appropriation of this characteristic.

The sorcerer's undertakings outlined above require an intense *waka* regimen, as he places himself in proximity to potent ancestral powers when he 'works' on the clothing and when he removes the liver from the deceased. The spirits of the recently dead are also considered dangerous. During these times both are in a state that Rappaport (1999, 219) describes as 'neither-nor'. The *avuavu* (spirit) of the deceased is neither a member of the living community nor has it yet joined the ancestors. The transition will not be made until the headstone feast is held about a year after the death. When in a state of *waka* the sorcerer is no longer a member of the living community, having undergone a process of physical withdrawal. In this altered physical state he resembles the ancestors but is not one of them. His neither-nor condition is *iavu*—hot, dangerous. He is a being to be feared.

In other respects Vula'a sorcery techniques bear a resemblance to practices that have been described for many parts of Melanesia. Importantly, though, that sympathetic magic can be used to cause death does not, as some commentators have assumed, point to a general Melanesian ignorance of the biomedical causes of illness and death. Moreover, greater education in this area, as is often suggested by development agencies, church organisations and others, does not offer an adequate solution to the problem of sorcery. Under the LMS, the Vula'a benefited from a high standard of mission education, and historically they have enjoyed high levels of white-collar employment in Port Moresby. Nowadays there are Vula'a employed in the professional sphere in PNG and in Australia. Most of them will tell you that an accomplished sorcerer knows how to target a person's biomedical weaknesses: 'If a potential victim has an illness, such as asthma or diabetes, a sorcerer can use it against them.' Christianity is also implicated in the fashioning of new responses to disease. It has recently been pointed out to me that in the Vula'a villages when a person falls ill some families will spend far too long praying before seeking medical help, sometimes with fatal consequences.

It is evident to the ethnographer and to the Vula'a themselves that fear of sorcery permeates their lifeworld, that the power fundamental to their cosmo-ontology engenders the possibility of fear.<sup>2</sup> Vula'a sorcery fears manifest in two forms. First, there is fear of those in close proximity—neighbours and relatives—who have a tendency towards jealousy. Vula'a sorcerers are employed to target those who are obviously

successful, for example, people who buy motor vehicles or make major improvements to houses or fishermen who are catching more than is considered appropriate. Wealth is more often hidden than displayed among the Vula'a because sorcery is generally inflicted by one's closest acquaintances. In 2001 I was told of a death by snakebite that was the result of sorcery. The victim was the teenage daughter of one of my female friends, and family jealousy was given as the reason for the attack. In 2010, when I was talking to people about their fishing methods, stories of jealousy and the sorcery-deaths of successful fishermen were common.

The other sorcery-related fear is of the potential power of the unknown, whether it dwells in a nearby village or a distant island. Men and women of all ages in Irupara tell stories of the sorcerers and witches of Mailu and Milne Bay to the east. Vula'a oral traditions make reference to their fear of the superior magic of the neighbouring agricultural villages (although this fact is today denied by descendants of those villages). In 2010 I was staying in a house where our nearest neighbour had recently been accused of being a sorcerer. Consequently, he and his family were formally given notice to vacate the village. Having come from an inland village, the accused man was considered an outsider, and he lacked the social capital necessary to establish a position for himself in Irupara, his wife's village. In a casual discussion with me about the accusations, he neither confirmed nor denied them. I concluded that it was in his best interest to preserve his reputation as a sorcerer. As I have said, 'sorcery' knowledge is part of a corpus of knowledge that is often controlled through lines of inheritance. There is, then, a sense in which villagers know who has what knowledge, and this is managed successfully. But there are other circumstances, such as when men marry in to a village that is customarily patri-local, and when magic is commercially acquired from outsiders, that are less manageable.

### **Towards an Anthropology of Fear**

Sorcery and witchcraft practices in Melanesia are as diverse as the languages and cultures that have occupied scholars for more than a century. On the southeast coast existence is infused with 'powers' that must be managed, despite a long history of Western influence. These lifeworlds are often at odds with imposed notions of law, politics, religion and secularism. Understanding sorcery in twenty-first century PNG is no less complex than it was in the colonial era. If we have learnt anything at all, it is that the local context is everything, and that there are alternative views that must be respected and accounted for. Moreover, the desire of many Melanesian people to be free of the fears and constraints that a life lived in the shadow of sorcery entails has not been met by Christianity.

In light of current attempts to develop legislation to address 'sorcery-accusation related violence' in PNG (Forsyth 2014) my contribution is intended to be theoretical rather than practical, as I see the value of an anthropology of fear extending well beyond Melanesia. From this perspective, an important response to the question of what to do about sorcery and witchcraft has been a general acknowledgement of

the right to a life free of fear. I have argued that there is a cosmo-ontological framework that relates sorcery beliefs to a magico-religious Vula'a lifeworld; that nowadays sorcery is commonly practised alongside Christianity; and that fear of sorcery is an existential condition. Power and fear are complementary aspects of everyday life, wherein sorcery is a mechanism for social control as well as a possibility for agency. Sorcery's ongoing presence as possibility creates a pervasive cultural mood. By way of further analysis I return to the functionalist approach that underpinned Lawrence and Meggitt's view of Melanesian religion before I outline Heidegger's existential analysis of fear.

Law, morality and religion—the very categories that have shaped recent discussion on sorcery and witchcraft—constituted the great regulatory functions of society for Durkheim and his followers. Building on Durkheim's theories, Victor Turner (1977, 47) suggested that by virtue of our participation in the social we recognise a system of social control. And for Roy Rappaport (1999, 224) participation in a ritual (or a system of beliefs and practices) 'indicates public and binding acceptance of the order it encodes, whatever internal doubts or ambivalences may be felt'. For other theorists ritual forms of behaviour are seen to control by 'defining, modelling, and communicating social relations' (Bell 2009 [1992], 89). Malinowski (1948, 143) proposed that the primary function of myth was to provide a link between magic, tradition and social power that would ensure social control through the maintenance of moral behaviour. The Vula'a have a corpus of *rikwana* (roughly, myths or old stories). Some of these account for the origins of food staples such as sago, mullet, dugong, coconuts and fishing nets. They generally contain a moral imperative and instructions for the magical means for abundant production. There are other stories, though, that also emphasise the value of magical knowledge. Typically, these narrate a battle of wits and a test of magical knowledge, whereby a being that is manifestly powerful is overcome by another whose magical knowledge was not previously evident. For example, a man in the form of a snake or a man-eating ogre is defeated by a boy who has recently attained manhood and inherited powerful magic. *Rikwana* remind people that the most powerful magic is hidden, suggesting too that sorcerers might 'hide behind the church'.

For Malinowski (1948, 137), myths—like magic and religion—performed a psychological as well as social function, transforming 'an emotionally overwhelming foreboding, behind which, even for a native, there lurks the idea of an inevitable and ruthless fatality'. Contra those functionalists who saw religion and magic as providing comfort, Radcliffe-Brown (cited in Bennett 1996, 80) argued that they were likely to 'give man fears and anxieties from which they would otherwise be free'. Sorcery fear is an enduring and pervasive mood that gives form to Vula'a sociality. For example, a few years ago in Irupara village I was awoken one night by a group of men who were yelling and banging things noisily in the dark. 'Drunk and disorderly' was the explanation that came immediately to mind and I lamented the consequences of alcohol consumption. Later, my inquiries provided a different explanation; the group of men who caused the disturbance had come from a neighbouring village to fish. Because they had split up

they were vulnerable to local *wara* and the loud noise was intended to scare these off. It also demonstrated that they themselves were not sorcerers. The practice is now commonplace.

Returning to my discussion of Vula'a cosmo-ontology we can say that a person finds themselves either in a state of *awana*, or not in a state of *awana*. This can be understood as a matter of morality that encompasses the disposition of the ancestors. Fear grows out of living a life in the presence of the influence and power of the ancestors and of the sorcerers who engage with them. In *Being and Time* Heidegger (1962) gave attention to emotional states and moods as he sought to communicate phenomenological concepts. He used the German word *befindlichkeit* (literally, the state in which one finds oneself (172)) to express the familiar, everydayness of Being-attuned: 'A mood assails us. It comes neither from "outside" nor from "inside" but arises out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being' (176). In an analysis of 'state-of-mind' as an existential mode Heidegger offers a detailed phenomenology of fear (179–182), which he says should not be understood as an 'individualised' disposition, but as an existential possibility of *befindlichkeit* (182).

There are three aspects from which to consider fear that belong together, according to Heidegger (1962, 179): that in the face of which we fear (the fearsome); fearing; and that about which we fear. I will elaborate them taking sorcery as my example.<sup>3</sup> The first, which Heidegger calls the fearsome, can be characterised primarily as threatening. Something that threatens us is detrimental, though, only when it is within striking distance: 'Indeed, something may be detrimental in the highest degree and may even be coming constantly closer; but if it is still far off, its fearsomeness remains veiled' (180). Fear of sorcery disappears into the background when illness, death and disharmony are not prevalent, but it is this aspect of sorcery—its very backgrounded-ness—that provides the condition for social control articulated in functionalist explanations. On the other hand, when that which is detrimental is close by it is manifestly threatening; 'it can reach us, and yet it may not' but it becomes *fearsome* (180). Heidegger suggests that the possibility that the threat may pass us by, rather than lessening our fearing, only serves to enhance it (180). If my neighbours or kinsfolk have been afflicted by sorcery, then it becomes fearsome to me as it does to them.

In the second aspect, fearing as such, 'what we have thus characterized as threatening is freed and allowed to matter to us' (Heidegger 1962, 180). When sorcery is allowed to matter, precautions are taken, suspicions aroused and accusations are made. 'And in fearing, fear can then look at the fearsome explicitly, and "make it clear" to itself. Circumspection sees the fearsome [sorcery] because it has fear as its state-of-mind' (180).

That which 'fear fears about' or more precisely the person for whose sake one fears is the third component of Heidegger's (1962, 180) analysis. One can fear for oneself and for others when sorcerers are active. 'Fearing-for is a way of having a co-state-of-mind with Others' (181). Fear, then, is not an individualised disposition, but a cultural mood that comes to the fore when the fearsome is within striking distance—when sorcery is a possibility.



On the southeast coast of PNG it is fear rather than physical violence that gives sorcery its force. That is not to say that physical violence is beyond the analysis I am proposing. The terror elicited by violence might well be understood as the fear-some in all its immediacy, 'unveiled' or 'un-hidden' to use Heidegger's terms. Harvey Whitehouse (1996, 703) has argued that terrifying ordeals occur in a range of religious contexts, from initiations and mortuary rites to millenarian activity. Sorcery, as I have argued, should also be contextualised in the religious. With sorcery, fear and suspicion arise because it is widely known that some people have access to a realm of non-human power. By giving attention to 'power' as it is understood by Melanesians themselves we see that it is fundamental to a magico-religious lifeworld that connects people with their ancestors. In the case of the Vula'a, the English translation of 'heat' for what they call *iavu* is not equivalent to an abstract idea of power. This heat is tangible and is borrowed from a realm that is, under certain conditions, readily available.

I find myself in agreement with recent commentators, who suggest a link between new forms of evangelism that emphasise the power and omnipresence of evil and current levels of fear. While this is not so much in evidence on the southeast coast, where the long-established national churches continue to dominate, the connection between Christianity and traditional forms of power must be acknowledged. Power and fear are fundamental aspects of Melanesian existence. Ethnographic evidence suggests that there is nothing new in this. Nevertheless, the new Christian Churches (and other Western institutions such as bio-medicine) bring a wealth of possibilities for those who wish to access non-human power and an increased fear for those who cannot. What is interesting then is that the relationship of magic (and sorcery) to religion to which Lévi-Strauss long ago drew our attention is still relevant. To paraphrase his insight in the Vula'a context, we might say that 'There is no Christianity without sorcery any more than there is sorcery without at least a trace of Christianity'.

## Notes

- [1] For a discussion of denominational differences in Irupara see Goddard and Van Heekeren (2003).
- [2] The problem was recently expressed by a Vula'a pastor (Aluvula 2010) who wrote a theological essay to address the persistence of his people's fear of sorcery.
- [3] My exegesis of Heidegger's analysis is greatly abbreviated here, but my intention is to capture his idea of mood as a collective state of mind.

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